Mess in the Archives

IT'S AN unhealthy situation when the nation's central record-keeping cortex, the National Archives, can't be regarded either as a reliably honest keeper of documents or a reliably orderly and well-managed institution. The archivist who just left office, Don W. Wilson, has managed to leave his agency's reputation severely clouded on both counts. First there was the long-running (and still unresolved) matter of the Bush and Reagan White House computer records. These were spirited out of the White House machines at the last possible moment, amid frantic court maneuverings, and deeded over to the Bush presidential library under a highly unorthodox agreement signed by Mr. Wilson—who, it then developed, had been in negotiations for a job he later accepted at that very library. Now comes a report done for the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency—itself a follow-up of a congressional investigation—that alleges a wide variety of strange management practices and outright misconduct by the inspector general and other officials at the National Archives, some of whom still hold their positions.

Most of the apparent problems concern Mr. Wilson's 1989 hiring of Lawrence Oberg as archives inspector general, a man who was eventually removed from the IG job following charges that he had put employees under surveillance, maintained a billing system that let management monitor the names and phone numbers of whistle-blowers and, while serving as inspector general, taken part in other archives operations including the move of a great many boxes of ex-president Reagan's records to the Reagan Presidential Library in California. That kind of activity by an inspector general goes against the law governing the inspectors general, which was passed to make sure that agencies got independent oversight.

The behavior by subordinates turns the spotlight back on Mr. Wilson, all the more so because, informed that Mr. Oberg had been investigated for various irregularities by the General Accounting Office, he gave him a different job within the archives, removed all negative evaluations from Mr. Oberg's files and reimbursed him at least $10,000 for legal fees. Mr. Oberg remains in his current job, a demotion of one pay grade, as do several other archives officials criticized in the report for "mischaracterizing" Mr. Oberg's qualifications or for allowing Mr. Oberg to report directly to them in violation of the inspector general law.

If Mr. Wilson's involvement in all this extends only as far as being what critics have characterized as an "absentee archivist," paying no attention to mounting irregularities and disorder, and putting Mr. Oberg into the inspector general position on the basis of qualifications the report calls "misstated or untrue," that's bad enough. But it's not clear that all these goings-on will fit under the bad-management umbrella. Sen. John Glenn has requested a further investigation from the Justice Department, and he ought to get it.